

Good morning Chair Cowles, Board of Trustees, Chancellor Malhotra, and other guests, thank you for the chance to speak to you today. My name is Jennifer Erwin, and I'm the President of the AFSCME Minn State Policy Committee.

AFSCME is working hard to ensure the safety of our members during this very difficult period of COVID. We've ordered and distributed masks to our members; we've fought for them to telework; we've asked them to stay safe, wash their hands, stay home when sick, and mask up. As a country and world, we are eight months in and while we know that masks, social distancing, and quarantining help to provide safety, we still struggle with employees who aren't allowed to telework, even though their job duties allow for it; still struggle with campuses who don't mandate masks and social distancing; and still have co-workers who are exposed to a staff member that tested positive who have to hear it from the rumor mill rather than their own supervisor.

Thanksgiving is coming, and while it's a wonderful time to be with family and be thankful for your blessings during the year, 2020 has more been a nightmare than a blessing. Our students, a lot who live apart from their parents and families, will be going home in droves for Thanksgiving. We know what that means – our numbers for COVID are going to increase even more. We encourage employees and students alike to not travel, not gather, with or to family for Thanksgiving. But yet we encourage those same employees and students to come to work, gather together for classes and sporting events, and to attend labs and lectures.

We can't continue to ask one thing, but expect something else. Students need to learn, yes, and we need to provide that learning and give them a successful environment in which to achieve that learning, but we don't need to put their health at stake. We showed in the spring that we as a system can pivot quickly when needed and our students can still be successful, and it is our belief that we need to pivot quickly again this holiday season. Go online after Thanksgiving, through winter break. Prepare in the spring to do the same thing. Maybe by next summer or fall, we will be able to get back to normal and in-person. But that time is not now. Not when we are seeing more than 7,000 positive cases a day.

Even as late as last Thursday, the Senate Republicans finally did not fight the extension of Governor Walz's emergency powers, stating "The surge is here. It's absolutely serious. People need to pay attention to it." We know our nursing students are needed; Mayo Clinic has 1,000 nurses out on sick leave. The students are as protected as they can be while at the hospital and our medical institutions need them; if the hospital is okay with those students still attending clinicals, we need to help our medical partners.

Please take a stand as a system and help us protect our students and employees. We need all of them to continue the good work of this system and the workforce we are able to provide to our business partners. We thank you for the work you've done, but ask you do more. We all need to do more, just not at the cost of life or death.